



WHARVES and SHIPPING

From the pioneer days, Black Rock harbor, sheltered by the long reach of Fayerweather Island, was used by coasting vessels, and became favorably known throughout the colonies. The earliest wharf was at the head of "shipharbor," near Thomas Wheeler's homesite, but the actual development of the waterfront between this point and Ash Creek was slow. There were other wharves and shipyards, beyond Sasco,—at Mill River and Saugatuck. Business was divided among several village-ports until early in the eighteenth century, when the unusually favorable facilities afforded to seatriade by the channel-depth and the embracing harbor, centered shipping interest in Black Rock. The concrete realization of these facilities began at the mouth of Ash Creek, and the first official mention of a wharf there bears the date of 1703 when John Edwards and John Sturges were given liberty to build a wharf on "Uncoway River," as Ash Creek was then known. This was followed in December, 1733, by a permit to Peter Thorp and Ebenezer Dimon to "set a Warehouse at the lower Balasses¹ at Ashhouse Creek." After Peter Penfield's gristmill was established in 1750, two wharves for small exports and imports were built at this point, as an adjunct to the mills; but the mouth of Ash Creek was not a harbor.

Eastward another wharf was projected in 1750, when on March 27th Samuel Squire and Ebenezer Wakeman were given liberty—

"to build a wharf on the ship harbor near the Parsonage meadow and a warehouse on or near the same, under such regulations and limitations as a committee appointed for that purpose shall agree, and that they shall build in three² years."

¹ Balasses—sandbars.

² This limitation of time frequently occurs in the records. Many promoters forfeited their permits by failure to develop within the specified term.

This project apparently languished until 1760 when on December 10th Samuel Squire alone was

“given liberty to build a Wharff on the Ship Harbor near the Money beach socalled, under such regulations as the selectmen and committee may determine.”

The building of the Squire wharf was accelerated by the laying out of the new road from Ash Creek in 1764-5. This wharfage business remained in the Squire family, and was set off in 1805 to John, Jr., in the distribution of Captain John Squire's estate. No trace now remains, owing to the erection of subsequent piers along this beach for the George Hotel, for the Bridgeport Yacht Club, and for the present Black Rock Yacht Club.

Beyond the Squire Wharf, toward the head of the harbor, was the Middle Wharf (now a stone ruin at the foot of Beacon Street).

The Middle Wharf was authorized by the town meeting of December 23, 1766:

“In pursuance of a Memorial Exhibited to this meeting by Job Bartram, Jonathan Lewis, Hezekiah Sturges, Abraham Gold, Moses Jennings, Abel Gold, Seth Osborn, Barnabas Bartram, and Gershom Burr Agreed that said Memorialists have Liberty to build a Wharf at Black Rock Harbour adjoining to Capt. Ichabod Wheeler's Wharf . . . provided they build the same within two years from this time.”

During the next three weeks, that shrewd person, David Wheeler, 3d, seems to have busied himself, for two deeds appear in the town records under date of January 21st, 1767. The first is from David Wheeler, 3d, to the town, opening the road now known as Beacon Street. The second is from David Wheeler to a company of thirteen proprietors, defining the land upon which the new wharf was built,—several hundred feet from the originally projected site and at the end of the new road. The thirteen shareholders included eight of the “memorialists” (Seth Osborn having withdrawn) with the addition of Hezekiah Fitch, Francis Forgue, David Wheeler himself, and his cousin, Abel Wheeler.

The land records for the subsequent thirty years show many changes in ownership of the thirteen shares, which were eventually acquired by the three Sturges brothers, Barlow, Benjamin, and Gershom, who sold their third-interests in 1805, 1809, and 1811,

to David Penfield. The new owner kept an account-book which records many quaint transactions.³

After his death in 1845, this wharf fell into disuse, since the new owner, Captain Benjamin Penfield, was master of packet boats from Bridgeport harbor.

The next wharf that can be traced above the Middle Wharf is comparatively modern, having been built about 1850 by Captain Daniel Wilson. Captain Howes there established his coal business, and its use was continued by Woodruff Burr, another coal trader, until the end of the century.

The upper wharves, at the head of the harbor, have a long history. There was always here a recognized "public slip" referred to as "Townsland" on the records, with space for boats to be drawn up. The rest of this section was crowded closely, with stores and warehouses jostling, beam by beam, in the business quests of their many successive owners.

At first the town policy in regard to granting riparian rights would seem to have been rather casual: but shortly after 1800 the increasing of business in Black Rock called for more definite strictures, and the records in 1802 read:

"Voted. . . that the said committee be impowered to lay out a convenient highway at the upper wharf so called at Black Rock not less than three

³ Part of David Penfield's account with Caleb Brewster reads:

		£	s	d
January 3	Gallon Molasses pint rum		4	6
1806	to Gallon Molasses		3	6
	to 4 Bushels red potatoes	1	3	
	to 4 Bushels white potatoes		15	
	to ½ Bushel		1	10½
April 23	Miss Brewster passage N. York		6	
	to one ½ bushels potatoes		4	6
Nov. 16	Sturges passage N. York		6	
	to fruit on Sundreys		3	6
	to one Baril and Small fruit		3	
June 1806	to your passage to N. York		6	
	Cutter Vigilant Wharfage and storage	1	7	
July 11	to ½ Gallon Molasses		1	10½
March 1807	to one Gallon		3	0
	Sturges passage		6	
	to one Baril and Hams		3	7
June	to 9 lb veal		3	
	Cutter wharfage and Storage 12 Days		18	
	Do to 6 Days		12	

rods in width for the accommodation of the individuals now settled there in business and the publick, and to lot out all the overplus land, the shipyard and graving bank excepted, for the purpose of promoting mechanics and merchants in their various branches with convenient stands for business."

The work of this committee encouraged the building of two new wharves and the development of the "waterlots" that were laid out south of the shipyard, and the re-surveyed highway gave a convenient access to the northernmost and oldest of the upper wharves,—that lying next the shipyard, built, it would seem, on the site of one still older.

The Upper Wharf is first mentioned in the archives as a grant to Captain Ichabod Wheeler, who was at that time owner of the shipyard above. Since the story of its development is typical of its neighbors, the Upper Wharf should perhaps be chronicled in a series of brief quotations:

10 Dec. 1760. .."Ichabod Wheeler to have Liberty to build a Wharff near the place where the old wharf was on the Ship Harbor. Col. James Smedley & Mr. Peter Penfield to be a committee"

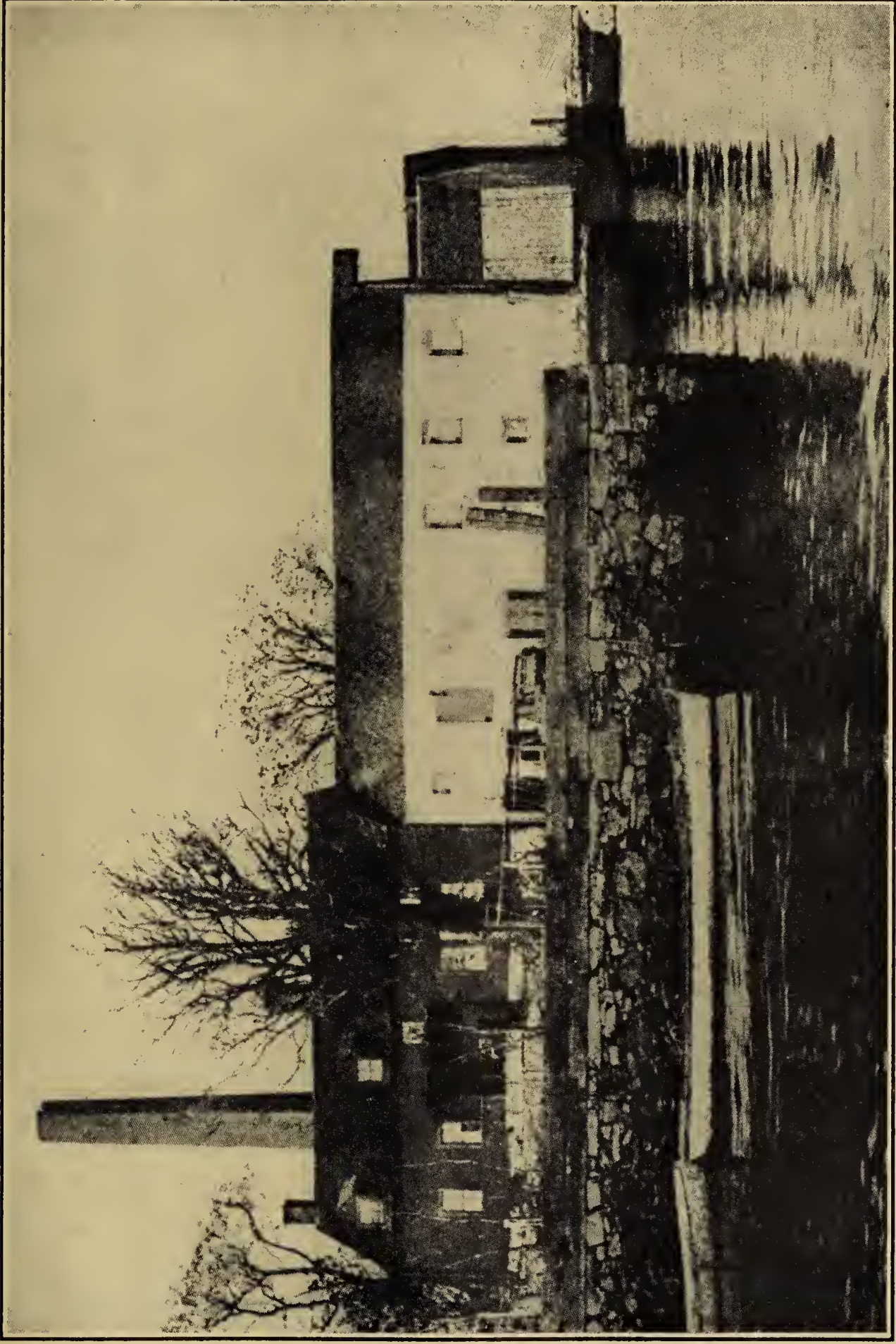
1 April 1761. .."We, the subscribers being appointed ... to lay out a place for Capt. Ichabod Wheeler to build Wharff on, did then survey & lay out...40 rods of ground, at a place called the old Shipyard at Black Rock"
James Smedley, Peter Penfield, Committee.

28 March, 1770. .."Ichabod Wheeler to James Smedley, Samll Bradley, Jr., Ebenezer Bartram, Jr., Robert Wilson & Nathaniel Wilson...Five-Sixths of a piece of land...at the place where a former Wharff was built..together with five-sixths of the Wharff thereon built in part already, together with the Timber there lying & being for the purpose of building said Wharff, & also five-sixths part of a Well thereon Dugg & made for the use of said Wharff...reserving one-sixth part for myself...."

(Dated July & August 1772, recorded 22 March 1786)

"We, part-owners of upper wharf where a suitable store for receiving goods & provisions is much needed...whereas Samll Sturges and Samll Smedley have proposed to build a store forty feet long, twenty-five in breadthagree & do grant the full of our rights to improve the plot of ground above."

Samll Bradley, Jr., Ichabod Wheeler, James Wilson.



The "Upper Wharves" and one of the original storehouses
(Photograph taken about 1900)

In January and March, 1801, Peter Perry of Mill Plain became sole owner, purchasing three-sixths from Caleb Brewster, one-sixth from Ichabod Wheeler, one-sixth from the heirs of Ebenezer Bartram, and one-sixth from Thaddeus Burr of Fairfield, as guardian of the heirs of Sarah Sayre. After this time Peter Perry's sons, Bradley and Seth, and his son-in-law, Hezekiah Osborn, became extensively interested in Black Rock water lots for three decades, although others appear as tenants or owners of the upper wharf store and old storehouse. This dock was in use until a few years ago.

The next water-lot southward was laid out by the town in 1801 to Hezekiah Osborn, who probably at that time built the house now occupied by Captain Fancher. In 1839 it was bought by Captain Andrew Turney from Munson Gray.

The adjoining wharflot was laid out in 1792 to John Wheeler, with a two year term within which to erect a wharf and storehouse. It was confirmed to Terence Riley ten years later, and after Riley's death was purchased from his creditor, Nicholas Fish of New York, by William Hoyt. The owners of this lot, then, as to-day, occupied the house across the road, which had been built for John Wheeler in 1789. The store and warehouse built by Riley on the wharf, later property of Bradley Perry, were continuously busy, owner succeeding owner. At last the store was remodeled into a dwelling, and later the old warehouse was pulled down.

Between this wharf and the next lay the "public slip," with land available for boatowners to draw up their craft. Across the road, next the house-property, was another piece of "townsland" also to accommodate shipmasters.

The next wharf was property of Peter Perry at his death, and was purchased from his heirs in 1814 by Sullivan Moulton of Greenwich, who later sold to Asa Beardslee. Successive owners were William Nichols, John Ogden, and Aaron Smith. The store that stood on this wharf occupied the jog in the northeast line.

South of these wharves were two "waterlots," the one next the wharf being first surveyed in 1803 to Joseph Bulkley, who later

came to Black Rock with his son Uriah.⁴ Both were in business at the store which they erected there, and which was later managed by Monson Gray, Thomas Ransom, and Gershom Sturges in a series of partnerships.

The next lot, originally surveyed to Captain David Hubbell, was later the property of Seth Perry.

The stores of Black Rock were noted for their chandlery. Even after Bridgeport wharves absorbed most of the sea-trade of the vicinity, ships from that harbor were sent to Black Rock to be fitted out for long voyages or repaired.

The shipyards of Black Rock are first noted officially about 1740, and the first single shipbuilder of consequence was Captain Ichabod Wheeler, whose yard lay on the lot north of the wharves, bordered by "shipharbor creek."

The Journal continually refers to this or that worthy who stayed in Black Rock "to build a ship" or "to launch a Vessel," and Longfellow's picture of a shipyard might have been sketched by William Wheeler's pen,—

". . . . timbers fashioned strong and true
Stemson and keelson and sternson-knee. . .
And around the bows and along the side
The heavy hammers and mallets plied. . . .
And around it columns of smoke, upwreathing,
Rose from the boiling, bubbling, seething
Caldron that glowed
And overflowed
With the black tar, heated for the sheathing"—

The children, playing about the framework, falling into the half-finished hold (more or less disastrously),—the ancient mariners strolling about, criticizing and commenting,—the shipmaster, anxiously casting up his past experience against his future hopes,—these compose the prelude for the sea-tale of every ship launched from the ways.

⁴ Uriah Bulkley was taken to New York at an early age by his father and instructed in the fine art of merchandising. He learned his lesson so successfully that at the time of his marriage to Jane Sayre the wedding was "town talk" for its elaborate niceties,—the fireplace wood being planed,—and—rumor said—gilded at the ends!

Not all of these tales were pleasant, as the Journal bears witness. The year 1804 dates a significant entry:

“Dec. 25th—About this time news came that the *June* (cost 2,000 dolls.) belonging to Riley and Joseph Squier of this port with 7 ton of Iron on board, was entirely lost on the devil’s back coming from Salem—And that the *Bonaparte*, about the same burthen, was lost together with a cargo of coals near Egg Harbor. And also that the *Rising Sun* had to throw overboard 34 or 40 barrels of oil to lighten her in a storm to pass Chatham Bar—These three vessels belonged to poor Black Rock.”

In addition to the building of ships, the repairing and scraping (or graving) of vessels was an important occupation. There are several references to the “graving banks” south of the wharves and shipyard, where the boats were laid up to be de-barnacled.

Captain Ichabod Wheeler’s chief successor was the firm of Daniel Wilson & Co. Later—in 1856—Captain William Hall came from “down east” and purchased (from four owners, Captain Brittin, Verdine Ellsworth, Elizabeth K. Wilson, and Sturges & Clearman) the former shipyard, and four waterlots. Upon the lower waterlots he managed a “ship-railway.” He died in 1860, and was succeeded by the firm of Hillard & Rew, later Rew & Walker.

One of the large vessels launched at Black Rock was the *Blackhawk*. Prophetically she “stuck on the ways,” and was lost on her first voyage. The *Sarah Jane*, later launched for the same owner, retrieved the fortunes of her predecessor.

The shipyard, about 1870, gave place to a turpentine factory, which burned⁵ in a spectacular fire, and the “shiprailway” business on the lower waterlots gradually languished. The day of steel ships was at hand.

⁵ There were a few odd incidents connected with the burning of the factory. It occurred on the first of April, and the directors were holding a meeting in Bridgeport to hear the very enthusiastic first reports of the company. When the news broke upon the meeting, they at first dismissed it as an April fool joke, then hastily adjourned.

The house next the factory, formerly occupied by Monson Gray, was also burned. The astute housewife who lived there had her stove carried out of her blazing home, and finished cooking her pies in the open air on the wharflot.

PARTIAL LIST OF COMMISSIONED PRIVATEERS*
SAILING OUT OF BLACK ROCK HARBOR
OR MANNED FROM FAIRFIELD

		<i>Commander</i>	<i>Guns</i>	<i>Crew</i>
<i>Defence</i> †	ship	Samuel Smedley‡	20	100
<i>Fox</i>	boat	A. Woodhull	1	10
<i>Hibernia</i>	sloop	Samuel Smedley	10	50
<i>Recovery</i>	ship	Samuel Smedley	16	120
<i>Spy</i>	boat	J. Squire	1	10

PARTIAL LIST OF VESSELS LICENSED AT FAIRFIELD

(Some of these doubtless cleared from Millriver Wharves at Southport
and from Westport-Saugatuck)

Nov. 25, 1793	Sloop	<i>Swain</i>	Master, D. Perry	Tonnage, 24
Sept. 9, 1794	"	<i>Tantalus</i>	" M. Goold	40
Oct. 20, 1794	"	<i>Driver</i>	" J. Bulkley	30
Jan. 10, 1795	"	<i>Rose</i>	" Albert Sherwood	55
April 10, 1795	"	<i>May</i>	" B. Thorp	20
May 16, 1795	"	<i>Industry</i>	" D. Beers	58
June 4, 1795	"	<i>Swain</i>	" W. R. Dimon	24
July 27, 1795	"	<i>Sophie</i>	" D. Osborn	35
Sept. 24, 1795	"	<i>Polly</i>	" A. Sherwood	25
Sept. 27, 1795	"	<i>Industry</i>	" D. Weeds	43
Dec. 11, 1795	"	<i>Ranger</i>	" E. Bulkley	35
Dec. 22, 1795	Schooner	<i>Union</i>	" I. Betts	43

* For detailed and very interesting information concerning these and other privateers, the reader is referred to a recent publication by The Essex Institute, "History of Maritime Connecticut during the American Revolution 1775-1783," by Louis F. Middlebrook.

† The *Defence* was a "state vessel." When first commissioned under Capt. Seth Harding in 1776, the pay list included:

Entered— 3 March 1776, Ebenezer Bartram, 1st Lieut.
10 March 1776, Samuel Smedley, 2d Lieut.
6 March 1776, Joseph Squire, Lieut. of Marines
6 March 1776, Gideon Wells, Surgeon
13 March 1776, Isaac Squire, Yeoman
6 March 1776, Joseph Bartram, Seaman.

‡ Capt. Smedley was eventually captured and spent two terms in captivity, the latter in an English military prison, from which he escaped to Holland and returned to Fairfield.

Partial "Return of moneys received from masters & owners of vessells of U. S., pursuant to the Act of Congress entitled An act for the relief of Sick & disabled Seamen," by Samuel Smedley, Collector of Customs for the District of Fairfield, 1 Oct.-31 Dec. 1798.

Date	Vessell	Master or Owner	Seamen	Mos.	Days	Amt.
Oct. 10, 1798	Sch. <i>Fair Trader</i>	J. Osborn	3	4		\$.80
11	Sloop <i>Coquet</i>	B. Sturges	2	2	22	.54
16	" <i>Industry</i>	B. Dimon	4	6	4	1.22
Nov. 6	" <i>Maria</i>	D. Osborn	3	3	22	.75
6	" <i>Delight</i>	G. Wells	4	8	18	1.60
6	" <i>Maria</i>	S. Hawley	3	6	18	1.32
23	" <i>Alexander</i>	G. Mills	3	8	9	1.66
Dec. 3	Sch. <i>George & Jane</i>	C. Elliot	8	24	24	4.90
14	Sloop <i>Rising Sun</i>	J. Betts	7	24	8	4.85
14	" <i>Dolphin</i>	S. Morehouse	2	6	28	1.39
17	" <i>Sally</i>	G. Allen	3	10	21	2.14
24	" <i>Factor</i>	W. Booth	4	15	24	3.04
27	" <i>Sally & Betsy</i>	J. Sackett, Jr.	3	11	21	2.34
27	" <i>Peggy</i>	J. Mead	2	7	24	1.56

If the length of time indicates the extent of the voyage completed, this is an interesting index of voyages made by boats manned by a few men as crew. Although it is probable that the time was distributed over several coasting trips, these small boats voyaged unusual distances, as we have other evidence to prove.